

Review of Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus*

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Bird MF 2014. *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

1. Introduction

It is fair to surmise that after more than two decades in which Pauline Studies dominated conservative New Testament scholarship, Gospels Studies is beginning to receive more attention among evangelical students. However, this renewed interest appears to be suffering from the dearth of weighty research monographs that critically evaluate the methodological questions underpinning the subject area. *The Gospel of the Lord* is one of a small number of recently published books devoted to meeting this need. Significantly, the book won the Christianity Today 2015 Biblical Studies Book of the Year Award (Christianity Today, 2015), and so deserves serious attention in the conservative tradition of scholarship.

The author himself is a widely published conservative evangelical scholar who lectures in Theology at the Ridley Melbourne College of Mission and Ministry in Australia (cf., Bird 2015; 2013). He notes in his preface to the book: ‘If my reading of the scholarly scene is correct, then “Gospels” is very probably the next big thing in biblical studies’ (2014:vii), a view with which I am in complete agreement. It is on this

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

basis that Bird sets himself the agenda of addressing the big methodological questions of the origins of the gospels, their literary nature and the manner in which they ought to shape our theological discourse. Having read the book twice now, it is my view that it should be a must-read for evangelical students planning postgraduate research in Gospel Studies.

In this extended review I intend to summarise the salient points made by the book and make some critical evaluative comments regarding a number of judgements and issues Bird addresses, particularly in the light of his stated aim to provide sound foundations for students of the gospels. I shall conclude at the end by providing my own evaluation of the role and limitations of the book in contemporary gospels scholarship.

2. Summary of Contents

The book consists of six chapters, with an extensive and helpful bibliography and indexes of names, subjects, Scripture and ancient texts. Each chapter examines a more or less standalone topic related to the gospels; thus it at first appears to be a monograph. Moreover, each chapter also contains an extensive excursus, often a chapter's length on its own. These address issues closely allied to the chapter's topic. All together then, the book is a comprehensive analysis of key foundational issues germane to gospels research. I shall now summarise and critique each chapter in turn.

2.1. Chapter 1: From Jesus to gospels

This brief five-page introductory chapter is devoted to laying out the four key questions which the book intends to answer. The first question is the historical question: how and why were the stories, teachings, and

events in Jesus' life put together and recalled? The second question is a sociological one: how were these stories, teachings and events transmitted between individuals and groups and generations to the point at which they were written down? The third question is a literary one: what were the written sources employed for constructing the present canonical gospels? The fourth question is a literary-theological one: why do we have four and not just one gospel?

The brief clarification of these questions in the chapter is then followed by an excursus which examines the theo-lexicographical background and provenance of the word εὐαγγελίου from which our English 'Gospel' is derived. Bird sets out a series of arguments to establish that εὐαγγελίου was associated in the ancient Greco-Roman world with delivery of good news of victory from the military battlefield. Yet he argues that its use in the New Testament derives from its Old Testament equivalent as expressed in accounts such as in 2 Samuel 18, 1 Kings 1, Psalm 68, 96, and especially in Isaiah 40–66. Its reception and use in the Intertestamental literature is also examined. Bird's emphasis of the εὐαγγελίου terminology in the Old Testament is an important contribution of the book since contemporary scholarship has tended to more readily associate it with its Greco-Roman origins.

Within the New Testament itself, Bird argues for a trajectory in which the terminology of εὐαγγελίου that was first used by Jesus, filtered through the apostles, particularly Paul, to end eventually with the evangelists. Bird mounts a series of vigorous arguments against the assertion in certain sections of scholarship that a difference existed between the sense in which Jesus used the term εὐαγγελίου and how it was employed by the post-Easter Christian community. Bird argues that on the contrary, Jesus' preaching of the εὐαγγελίου was in direct continuity with the Church's preaching of the same. 'The good news of

God's victory in Isaiah turns out to be God's victory in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Thereafter, the story of Jesus' messianic work for God's kingdom becomes determinative for the content of the church's gospel' (2014:17).

I found this chapter to be very cogent and helpful since it carefully formulates the key questions to be answered in subsequent chapters, sets out the agenda for the book, and provides reasonably comprehensive and weighty discussions on why answering these questions matters. However, even though along the line, Bird discusses the issue, I think it would have been appropriate also for him to have raised the theological question of what was special about the canonical Gospels to have so quickly commanded the high status of inspired scripture at the same level of the Old Testament Scriptures. As I say, this question is somewhat addressed at various points of the book, but in my view it merits a whole chapter, since it goes to the foundations of why the gospels are what they are.

2.2. Chapter 2: The purpose and preservation of the Jesus tradition

The second chapter is devoted to analysing why and how the Jesus tradition was preserved to the point of eventually being fixed in the written form. Bird believes answering the question of the purpose for which the tradition was preserved is necessary so as to address 'scholarly suspicion' (2014:21) regarding the historical veracity of the traditions in the gospels. At the root of this scholarly scepticism is the assumption that given their theological commitments, the evangelists could have played fast and loose with the oral traditions about Jesus. This question then goes to the foundations of the historical method, *inter alia*, why would the evangelists be interested in accurately preserving the historical elements of the Jesus traditions? So one way of addressing this question is to show that yes, there was a useful historical

rationale for preserving the traditions about Jesus in the gospels. In Bird's words, 'If we can identify the purpose that the Jesus tradition had in the early church, then we have arrived close to a satisfactory explanation for its enduring existence' (2014:23). That is what the second chapter sets out to do.

Bird sets out four reasons why the Church preserved the Jesus tradition in its systems of memory. First of all, he argues that the Church's fundamental preaching on faith based on the death and resurrection of Jesus necessitated the presupposition that a historical Jesus once lived prior to his death. Providing an account of precisely what the living Jesus did was thus of necessity an integral part of their preaching.

Secondly, Jesus' teachings were of so considerably practical importance to the Church that it was necessary for the historical contexts in which he taught them to be preserved. An account of the traditions about Jesus, then, was necessary to provide a context for the practical teachings of the Church. Thirdly, the first Christians needed to preserve the account of Jesus' life, teachings and events because the tradition enabled the Church to define itself against other Jewish groups with whom it was involved in a constant existential struggle. Fourthly, in sociological terms, Jesus was regarded by the first Christians as founder of a new movement. In that case, one would expect that his first followers would have huge interest in cataloguing and preserving the history of Jesus' life. These four reasons provide the historical rationale for the preservation of the tradition about Jesus.

As to the manner and instruments used for the preservation of the Jesus tradition itself, Bird evaluates a number of arsenals which the first Christians deployed for retaining the memory. Such arsenals include pedagogical devices such as poetic renditions of Jesus' sayings and mnemonics, rabbinic pupil style note-taking, vivid accounts by

eyewitnesses, who often had their stories purposefully linked to their names so ensuring durability of the stories, activities by the earliest Christians that imitated some of Jesus' actions and so entrenched memories of Jesus' practices, the authentication of teachers as *bona fide* custodians and transferees of the traditions, and the whole church community taking responsibility for preserving the tradition. So, to the question as to why and how the first Christians preserved the Jesus tradition, Bird's answer is that the church had many justifications as well as the sufficient varieties of means to preserve the accounts of what happened in Jesus' life.

The excursus in Chapter 2 examines the often vexed question of evangelical scholarship and its interface with critical approaches to the Gospel. Bird puts the issue this way: 'How does all this scholarly stuff square with a view of Scripture as inspired, infallible, containing a message of salvation, and embodying our Christian hopes?' (2014:67). To this question, Bird proposes an approach he calls, 'believing criticism', an approach which maintains that the Bible is the inspired word of God 'but contends that we do Scripture the greatest service when we commit ourselves to studying it in light of the context and processes through which God gave it to us' (2014:68). This involves a 'hermeneutic of trust' (2014:72) as well as the willingness for evangelicals to do the hard graft of addressing the difficult questions that the gospels pose to modern minds. I find Bird's articulation of his approach to scholarship quite refreshing.

This is another good chapter as it robustly addresses the sceptical stance of a number of New Testament scholars to the gospel stories. In that regard, the chapter makes important arguments for using the gospels as the most important sources for historical research into Christian origins.

However, as a line-up of Bird's interlocutors in the chapter indicates, several of the objections that he devotes the chapter to address were raised not by contemporary scholars, but by nineteenth-century scholars such as Bultmann, Käsemann, and Dibelius, admittedly scholars who albeit continue to exert a degree of sway in Gospels studies. Even so, it seems to me that the nature of the objections has slightly changed and so needed a bit more nuanced analysis in the chapter. Among those in contemporary scholarship who object to the historical pedigree of the Jesus traditions in the gospels, the tendency is to stratify the gospel materials into categories with different degrees of authenticities. Some of the accounts such as the miracles are often practically, if not overtly, discounted, and other stories are regarded as significantly embellished with only a tiny kernel of historical tradition worth accepting.

In such a situation, the task of providing an account of the preservation of the traditions to the point of their fixing in the written form goes beyond establishing the purpose for which they were preserved. It also raises the issue of the sacred context in which the stories were preserved. In other words one crucial factor that may have necessitated and controlled the preservation of the traditions is the miraculous nature of many of these traditions, especially the resurrection itself. The people who told the stories thus knew that they were narrating stupendous revelatory events. Put another way, rather than being embellishments, the miracles in fact played a role of sacred guarantors of the preservation and transmission of the tradition. Bird could have addressed this wider effect of the miracles in the preservation of the traditions.

2.3. Chapter 3: The formation of the Jesus tradition

The aim of the third chapter is to establish the best theoretical model of oral transmission of the Jesus tradition capable of explaining the literary nature of the gospels. Bird does this by surveying the merits and

demerits of five different models. He rightly rejects the first model which posits that such a quest is ultimately futile because, as it is claimed, the oral tradition is irretrievably lost or bore little relationship to contents of the gospels in the first place. The second model is directly opposite to the first, and posits that an extremely 'fluid, free and flexible' situation existed whereby stories about Jesus mixed effortlessly with folklore, myths and legends. This model is also to be rejected because the New Testament indicates that among other things, the first Christians were particular in ensuring precision in the transmission of the tradition.

The third model employs historical accounts on how rabbinical pupils of the second century onwards functioned to postulate that among the first Christians, there were equivalent formally controlled mechanisms for memorising Jesus' teachings. Bird identifies some significant attractions of this model and argues that it is likely that at least some of Jesus' teachings and parables would have been recorded and memorised by his disciples. After all they frequently addressed him as Rabbi. Bird nevertheless highlights a number of limitations of this model which necessitate augmenting it with less formal means of transmission of the tradition. The fourth model proposed principally by Werner Kelber argued for a form of controlled oral transmission regulated by the common laws of folklore of the culture and era. This approach, Bird rejects because of its inauthenticity.

Bird's preferred model is derived from Kenneth Bailey's 1990s socio-anthropological work among Middle Eastern villagers which documented how oral traditions were informally controlled by the Mediterranean societies. 'On this model, the tradition is transmitted informally: anyone in the community can theoretically participate in the retelling of stories and sayings. It is also controlled, however, since the traditions are owned by the community at large' (2014:92). Building on

this model, Bird maps out a theory of social memory among the first Christians that explains the manner in which the whole community informally ensured the stability of the Jesus traditions. ‘It is apparent that “memory” was an important category in determining what the Gospels contained and also how they preserved a tradition about Jesus’ (2014:104).

The first Christians, Bird argues, felt it as a key element of their responsibility to ‘faithfully recall’ the works and words of Jesus. Bird points out that several factors impinge upon what was remembered and what was forgotten, even within a large group of Christians immensely affected by the events of Jesus’ life. Moreover, the believers’ current experiences played a role in shaping this social memory. Social memory, he argues, is ‘a negotiation between relics of the past and the contingencies of the present’ (2014:107). Even so, these factors do not, on the whole, undermine the veracity of the recall.

The chapter finishes with an excursus which sets out several factors and reasons why the Form Critical movement which devoted itself to addressing the same questions of the chapter failed. In a gist, that quest lacked a compelling account of how the traditions could have been stabilised to the point in which they ended up in the written form.

I find Bird’s arguments in favour of social memory theory as underpinning the transmission of the Jesus tradition as robust and worthy of serious consideration. My only wish is that Bird could have combined this social memory model with elements of the formal control model evaluated earlier. Bird certainly argues for the viability of elements of the formal control model, but he hesitates to incorporate these elements into his ultimately preferred model of informal control through social memory theories.

One other area on which I would have liked Bird to shed some light is the claim by the first Christians that the Holy Spirit played a role in maintaining and shaping this memory (e.g. Luke 12:12; John 14:26, 16:13). It is true that this chapter is devoted to historical investigation of the phenomenon. It is thus somewhat understandable that Bird avoids theological explanations of the kind of social memory that the Gospels themselves indicate was at play in preserving the traditions. Even so, the fact that at least some of the people involved in retaining this memory invoked this pneumatological explanation means that the social memory model needs further augmentation with consideration of the self-understanding of the first Christians as enabled by the Spirit to remember the traditions. In fact, it is significant that Bird cites John 2:22 as one support for his theory of the role that social memory played in preserving the tradition. In that case, he could have highlighted this other Johannine pneumatological account of the preservation of the traditions.

2.4. Summary of Chapter 4: The literary genetics of the gospels

The fourth chapter is dedicated to surveying some of the proposed solutions to the Synoptic Problem and the Johannine Question. After laying out the literary features of the Synoptic Problem, Bird evaluates six categories of proposed solutions, each with their proponents and advantages on the one hand, as against their disadvantages and vehement critics. Bird himself supports an eclectic approach, the Holtzmann-Gundry hypothesis, which basically posits ‘(1) Markan priority, (2) Matthew used Mark and Q, (3) Luke used Mark and Q; and (4) at a later point, Luke incorporated Matthew into his own work’ (2014:156). Bird admits that this makes the situation rather complicated, but thinks the complexity of evidence requires that multifarious solution.

I am not wholly convinced, however, about this approach, especially since it regards the hypothetical Q as central to the solution. Bird asserts, ‘I believe in Q because, despite its potential misgivings, it allows us to hold together a literary connection between Matthew and Luke that is indirect enough to explain their varied order and divergent utilization of the double tradition’ (2014:187). Yet his specific proposal of a Q-like document which is much less fixed than the hypothetical Q that is often postulated by a section of scholarship would not appear to bear the weight of explanation of the double tradition that he ultimately puts on it.

With regard to the Johannine Question, Bird highlights the significant similarities and yet differences between John’s Gospel and the Synoptics: ‘While comparing [John] with the Synoptics may not be quite like comparing apples to oranges, it certainly is like comparing oranges to mandarins’ (2014:193). He examines nine different proposed options for explaining the relationship, but opts again for an eclectic approach which envisages ‘spasmodic interpenetration of Synoptic and Johannine traditions across each other in pre-literary stages’ (2014:212). Despite this proposal, Bird is of the opinion that if John knew the Synoptics, he nevertheless ‘applies that knowledge in a way that makes his Gospel look somewhat removed and distant from them’ (2014:212).

The excursus in Chapter 4 is a collection of Patristic statements and quotations regarding the order and relationships between the gospels. Quotations from Papias, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Jerome, and Augustine among others are reproduced without commentary.

Perhaps due to the multitude of divergent solutions to the Synoptic Problem that are evaluated, I found this chapter not as stimulating as the previous ones. It is evidently no fault of Bird’s, for the cluttered

situation indicates continued scholarly bafflement by the problem. All the same, I wonder whether Bird could not have simplified the account by eliminating some of the largely abandoned proposals such as the Lessing hypothesis.

2.5. Summary of Chapter 5: The genre and goal of the gospels

The fifth chapter of the book logically follows the previous chapter by posing the question as to the literary genre and form of the Gospels. As Bird points out in his introduction to the chapter, this question is fundamentally important for both historical and hermeneutical reasons: ‘Genre matters because genre creates a framework of expectation between an author and readers by appealing to known literary frames of reference’ (2014:222). In other words this question sets the parameters in which readers of the gospels are to interpret those works.

Bird approaches the task in three big steps. First of all, as he does in the previous chapters, he again reviews five options that have been proposed as suiting the genre of the gospels, namely, as a distinct category of Christian writings, a sub-category of first-century Jewish literature, an aretology (Greco-Roman biography of a ‘divine man’), a sub-type of Greco-Roman novel, and a Greco-Roman biography. For each option, Bird examines the merits of the proposal and delineates their shortcomings. He argues in favour of the last option, but points out that given the significant diversity of ancient Greco-Roman *bioi*, a more precise characterisation of the specific type of *bioi* that the gospels are is required.

Bird next devotes himself to establishing the contours of the literary phenomenon that the gospels are as a way of identifying their precise genre as *bioi*. He identifies the openings of all four canonical gospels as placing them in the category of biographies. He then argues that several of the designations attributed to the gospels by the Church Fathers, such

as regarding them as ‘sayings of Jesus’, ‘memoirs of the apostles’ and their supplied titles as ‘Gospels’; these designations Bird thinks, constitute as evidence that the earliest readers regarded these *bioi* as closely tied to Christian proclamation, the kerygma. It is this conclusion which then leads Bird to argue that the Gospels are specific type of *bioi* which may be labelled as ‘biographical kerygma’. As kerygma, the Gospels theologically, christologically and inter-textually adapt the biography genre to fit the primary task of proclamation by the first Christians.

I am somewhat sympathetic to the broad outline of Bird’s proposal. It certainly recognises the three key literary features of the gospels, namely as historically biographical, as literarily continuous with the Old Testament and as theologically conveying the kerygma of the Christians. I wonder, however, whether in characterising the gospels as ‘biographical kerygma’ and not a ‘kerygmatic biography’, Bird may be in danger of losing something of the gains that have been made in recent Gospels scholarship in establishing the genre of the gospels as *bioi*.

My quibble here may be a touch pedantic, and perhaps less than fair to Bird. All the same, it appears to me that if in our quest to precisely identify the specific genre of the gospels, the emphasis is placed on its kerygmatic nature at the expense of its essentially biography nature, then it is only a small step to reducing the re-appreciation of the historical viability of the contents of the gospels as biography. After all, as Bird himself notes in his critique of the ‘luminaries of the form-critical school’ (2014:223), it is this school’s exaggeration of the kerygmatic nature of the gospels which resulted in their discounting of the gospels as ‘expanded cult legends shaped by Christian preaching of the risen Christ’ (2014:224). As I say, this is far from Bird’s intention

and belief. Nevertheless, in the light of the evidence he mounts, it might have been better to regard the precise genre of the Gospels as ‘kerygmatic biography’ rather than his proposal of “biographical kerygma”.

The chapter closes with another helpful excursus on the non-canonical gospels specifically regarding the features that differentiate them from the canonical gospels. This again is an important question given the current proliferation of myths in the popular imagination that these non-canonical gospels represent the accounts of marginalised minority Christians. Bird’s conclusion is that ‘The rejection of “other” Gospels by the proto-orthodox and orthodox churches was neither arbitrary nor merely political’ (2014:293). He points out that these ‘other’ gospels were rejected because (a) the Jesus they describe bears no semblance with the Jesus described in the sacred writings, (b) the vocabularies they deploy with regard to their affirmations about God, creation, sin, ethical behaviour and salvation are frequently ‘esoteric, elitist and erroneous’, and (c) they appear very late on the scene and cannot be historically proven to be traceable in origins to the first followers of Jesus.

2.6. Summary of Chapter 6: The fourfold gospel of Jesus Christ

The final chapter is devoted to examining one of the curious features of the New Testament, namely, why did the early church decide to keep all four Gospels, that is, the tetrevangelium, in parallel in the canon? Put differently, why did they decide to keep the tetrevangelium in this form rather than choosing one gospel with a single story or even one which harmonised all four gospels into a single account? Bird underlines this question as requiring both historical and theological answers and proceeds in the chapter to address it. Essentially, he evaluates an amount of historical evidence to account for the emergence of the four gospels as a single collection central to the worship and doctrinal

proclamation of the Church. He also examines how various harmonies of the gospels emerged and notes that despite their general popularity, these harmonies were never considered as viable replacements of the fourfold gospels. On the contrary, the early Church theologians, from Irenaeus to Augustine developed theological accounts to undergird and justify the maintenance of the fourfold nature of the gospel as ‘plurality in unity’ (2014:326). The excursus of the final chapter examines the extant manuscripts of the gospels and argues for their essential stability.

3. General Evaluation and Conclusion

In my view, Bird has made an extremely important contribution to contemporary gospel scholarship, coming as it has at the cusp of a new wave of interest in historical Jesus and gospels research. In the first place, his review and evaluation of theories on the shape and development of the pre-literary Jesus tradition is a masterclass in careful historical methodology and research.

Secondly, his proposal applying insights from socio-anthropological models of memory to underline the stability and preservation of these traditions has several advantages in its favour. As I have pointed out in this review, however, this model needs to be augmented with the fact of the self-understanding of the first Christians as enabled by the Holy Spirit to guarantee the integrity of this social memory.

Thirdly, Bird’s major contribution is to progress the current scholarly discourse regarding the genre of the Gospels as *bioi* to establish their precise sub-genre. Again, I have argued that his proposal that we may regard the gospels as ‘biographical kerygma’ could inadvertently displace them from their primacy as biographies. I have therefore suggested that the label ‘kerygmatic biography’ would be more suitable.

Finally, Bird is to be commended for providing readers with a significant amount of extra materials in the excursus at the end of each chapter. Most conservative students will find these materials to be useful for their research into the gospels. It is for these reasons and to this particular constituency that I highly commend the book.

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